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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PROMINENT SUNNI MODERATE SEES COMPROMISE
OPTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) A respected Sunni moderate, Tamam Salam, says that the Christian/Hizballah alliance is no bad thing for confessionally riven Lebanon, and he indicated that Syria is the major problem in the current political crisis. He both defended and criticized Hizballah. Openly sharing his views, both positive and negative, of key players in Lebanon, he sees the immediate future as "uneasy." End Summary.

DON'T CALL HIZBALLAH TERRORISTS

12. (C) Tamam Salam, the scion of one of Lebanon's most distinguished Sunni families, met with the Ambassador and emboff on November 15 to exchange views. Jumping right into the conversation with a caution to the USG, Salam said that the U.S. cannot go on labeling Hizballah as terrorists. He criticized the Secretary's speech in Saudi Arabia, saying that if Israel cannot take out Hizballah, how could the much-weaker Lebanese Armed Forces? As he definitively linked regional changes to changes in Lebanon, Salam said that the U.S. image in Lebanon was very badly damaged during the first weeks of the war. Improvement might come with the cessation of the Israeli overflights, and some movement on the issue of Sheb'a Farms.

13. (C) Salam argued that that the Aoun/Hizballah alliance is a good thing, and serves to de-confessionalizes the situation. The Sunni/Shiite divide is greater than Muslim/Christian differences, although he pointed out that outside Lebanon groups like Hizballah and Hamas are viewed first as warriors with a common goal -- Israel -- and not as different Muslim sects. Although he stated that Hizballah "understands its limits" and does not want to take over, he later added that Hizballah wants to bring the government down, "even by lynching."

SYRIAN PARANOIA WILL HURT EVERYONE

14. (C) Syria is the biggest problem, according to Salam. Syria wants Lebanon to fail completely in their own absence, something that Iran does not necessarily want, but will allow. Pointing out that the Syrian "vendetta" was not obvious in previous years when he met with SARG President Asad, he cited an Arabic proverb to the effect that there are

none so bitter as Syrians toward their friends. He pointed out that recently, Syria has been spending money in Lebanon, to buy allies and influence, as opposed to taking it out, the practice followed during Syria's occupation. Charles Ayyoub, the editor of the pro-Syrian sensationalist paper, Ad-Diyar, is on their payroll, he said. Salam scoffed at the Ad-Diyar report that morning claiming that 50,000 U.S. troops would be moved from Iraq to pro-March 14 areas of Lebanon to keep control.

15. (C) Salam provided a list of Syria's grievances. Syria is claiming that Saudi Arabia is trying to squeeze it financially. Syria opposes the international tribunal on the Hariri assassination. All of Syria's actions since Rafiq Hariri's murder have appeared to be an admission of guilt. But in addition, Syria does not want to cede its influence in Lebanon to anyone. Painting a picture of Syrian paranoia, he said that Syria doesn't trust Nasrallah either. Salam pointed out that King Abdullah personally told him that he had given Asad a way out of the Hariri assassination accusations, but Asad didn't take it, probably because he was pressured by Asad family connections.

GRADING THE PLAYERS

16. (C) Willing to share a bit of gossip, Salam said that Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh is working miracles, and added that Finance Minister Jihad Azour is also doing a good job. He said that both are holding back those who want to take advantage of the crisis, and have a lot of credibility. He also admires PM Siniora and Speaker Berri, saying that they are both trying to do something good. Berri is clever and resilient, and the recent trip to Iran will give him street credibility.

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17. (C) Less happy with Saad Hariri (who, of course, is the political head of the Sunni family that greatly eclipsed the Salam family's political fortunes), he pointed out that Hariri's attitude of, "if you are not with us, you are against us" was unlike what his father would have done. Salam said that Hariri treats politics like business deals, and his supporters are "bad."

COMMENT

18. (C) Salam was curiously detached and dispassionate when talking about the immediate future of Lebanon. He referred to the present crisis as "an uneasy time," surely an understatement. He refers to Hizballah as though it were an errant child. Although Salam said that moderates are not being heard or accepted, he did not offer any possible solutions. End comment.

FELTMAN